

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS

U N I V E R S I T Y   O F   D A L L A S

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May 11, 1972

What is honor? A word. What is that word honor? Air. Who has it? He that died on Wednesday. Does he feel it? No. Does he hear it? No. Is it insensible, then? Yes, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honor is a mere scutcheon; and so ends my cathecism.

Dr. Cowan, distinguished faculty, my friends:

Through four years and various courses, I have heard it said that societies and civilizations are characterized by certain virtues or qualities that they prize most highly. They, by their very structure and spirit, ferment in their people a certain instinct that parallels their origins, their foundations, and consciousness of the real. In that case, one might be hard put to pinpoint whatever virtues or qualities characterize, by their presence or omission, the times and the crowd, into which, one might envision, we are about to be engulfed.

May be that contemporary man, or for that matter the entire "modern" or "post-modern" world has no virtues or qualities, readily noticable. Could we say that it is characterized by, cherishes, and appeals to history with, say, honesty? courage? patience? humility? joy? Instead of "peace" is the battle-cry ever any more "victory" or "God with it"? Instead of first thinking "convenient" or "practical," is it "the best," or even "good?" Like Shakespear's Falstaff, the answer that most tempts me is "no."

We cannot dissect at the hinges that it does not have the context in which we are anymore than we can parade a man for our scrutiny by breaking him down into neat compartments--the psychology generally practiced outside the University's walls notwithstanding.

Yet, it strikes me as particularly significant that there is one word that finds its way into our conversation as seldom as it is heralded in print. There is one concept, one sentiment, one comprehensive virtue--certainly not the only one--that the present remembers and holds with sadly weak affection--honor. Is it simply neglected or actually foreign?

I suspect that most people, if they were to bother at all, would nod in agreement if you offered Schopenhauer's definition. "Honor," the pessimist wrote in 1851, "is, on its objective side, other people's opinion of what we are worth; on its subjective side, it is the respect we pay to this opinion."

Now, to the arrogant and isolated individual who is not yet weaned from an era that fractionalizes and parcels out, one to be inherited by specialists and minorities, "other people's opinions" does have a repulsive taste. To cater to those opinions is grossly vulgar and vain. As indeed it is.

Schopenhauer's definition is misconceived and illegitimate. Why, since the nominalist perversion has been discredited, do we still feel embarrassed and unable to challenge the statement that honor--or loyalty or decency or wisdom--is what other people think?

Inasmuch as it is recognized by others and affects them, honor is a public virtue. But the fragility of the honorable soul does not stem from any reliance on the consensus of mankind

but rather from its own excellence, its own ambition for reaching "above and beyond the call of duty." "No man," Samuel Johnson validly wrote, "can justly aspire to honor but at the hazard of disgrace." That is why honor, the quest for it, the presence of it, the man in whom it lives, is not ordinary, is in the most real sense exalted. The tradition of honor in Western civilization is heroic, brave, generous, sometimes humble, always noble. The revisionist historians who thrive in exposing the flaws of great names do not detract from this truth.

Heroic, excellent, superior, brave, noble--words that would describe most aptly, at least one professor would assure me, an aristocratic society. For its timelessness, honor must be the antonym of a materialistic conscience. It will be submerged, it will be forgotten, it will remain only on the pages of dictionaries, where man stresses the average, the common, the usual, where he wallows in the lethargic comfort of surrender to worldly ease. In a place where holidays are re-arranged for the convenience of three-day weekends; where murder is "liberalized" in order to avoid suffering; where it becomes fashionable for everyone to say "love" but not to know what love demands and to say peace, peace--but there is no peace--there honor will be considered a fiction, a disguise. Suspicion will make it so unmentionable that it will be heard only in jest. And when honor has become a joke, we have made ourselves fools.

It is as simple, and as demanding, as saying that one doesn't decide to get up and attain some honor. It is one with the person it describes, with the response to the situations that demand it, with the "veritier" which give it existence. It eludes any concise definition. It is found where generosity, integrity, valor



and persistence support the noble heart that is graced with the truth. And in the uniqueness of its being, honor is rightly sensitive to its own excellence. Reflecting on the damage of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke in his genius for perception put it well. "It is gone," he wrote, "that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honor, which felt a stain like a wound." A stain painful for its disgrace.

He was speaking of a nation, but there the case is only one of extensions. As a nation depends for its existence upon its people, so it can derive its conduct only from the spirit of its people. Forgotten by its citizens, honor can only disappear from the body politic, from the life and name of the country. It quickly leads to or perhaps is only a symptom of the loss of merit, vision, wisdom. It leads to cowardice parading under other names, to sterility and disintegration. Just maybe, it is not that far gone. Woodrow Wilson could still tell a cheering crowd in 1916 that "the nation's honor is dearer than the nation's comfort; yes, than the nation's life itself." When time has come, as Ishmael would say, to coil our ropes, man must stand on his honor, or lose hope in his disgrace.

Now, there are those that would tell us that death makes all this senseless, that the final denominator cancels out all significance to life. If honor will not live with the living and to the dead it is insensible then we are only sound and fury.

Yet man has sensed, even before he was singing of the wrath of Achilles, that he is greater than death. But not by his own merit. Honor is real only in its loyalty to mortal dignity. Honor is immortal only in its loyalty to the glory of God. Only in the service of Our Lord, with the faithfulness of King Lear's

Kent, is the excellence of honor the glory of the human spirit.

Then, perhaps the most legitimate symbol, an historical one, of the man of honor is that one which this University has adopted, the Crusader, when the sense of honor was so keen that Pope Urban II could proclaim the first Crusade because "God wills it" and Christendom would rally to the Faith. If this University is to be true not just to its cultural inheritance but likewise to its eternal devotion, then she must light in those that come to her the militant fire of that Christian tradition.

If every graduating class must present a challenge as its farewell, then consider this one, never trite, never hollow, but always alive and in need of us.

Let us recognize the sterile secularism that is upon us as the potential destruction of the honor of man. Let us find our sources, our strength and our direction in the glory of the Christian tradition, so often invoked on this campus. Let's rid ourselves of the fear of dealing seriously with this enemy, wherever we find it, even if the ridicule of the degenerate is our only temporary reward.

Pope Gregory the Great is first credited with this celebrated phrase; Ignatius of Loyola made it the fire of the Society of Jesus, it is the reason of our very being:

Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam

To the greater glory of God.